

# New Life for the Blackstone

*30 years of the Clean Water Act Produce Results*

## Lonsdale Drive-in

Years ago, Joni Mitchell wrote a song with lyrics that went “...you don’t know what you’ve got ‘till it’s gone, you take paradise, put up a parking lot....” Did she write those lyrics with the Lonsdale Drive-in in mind?

In the early 1950’s, in Lincoln, Rhode Island, a local paradise for birds and species that flourish in fresh water marshes, was turned into a twenty acre asphalt parking area. To area movie buffs, it was known as the Lonsdale Drive-in. When it closed in the early 80’s, however, it left behind its mammoth screens, a radio tower, and all its asphalt. Those familiar with the site, just above the Valley Falls Marsh, know it was once part of the lower Blackstone River watershed’s most valued fresh water resources.

In June, a multi-agency Project Cooperation Agreement was signed that committed \$2.05 million to the Lonsdale Drive-in Environmental Restoration project to restore the area to wetlands and wildlife habitat. The US Army Corps of Engineers is providing 65% of the project’s funding and it is the first aquatic



# REVOLUTIONS



*Above: The Blackstone River and  
Sign of the times: the Lonsdale Drive-  
in, Lincoln, RI.*



ecosystem restoration project along the Blackstone River. “Once polluted with industrial waste, collaborative restoration actions by local, state and federal agencies and private organizations over the past 30 years have immeasurably improved the river’s water quality,” Rhode Island’s Department of Environmental Management’s Director, Jan H. Reitsma, told the crowd assembled at the abandoned drive-in site for the signing ceremony.

While replicating marshland is incredibly difficult, this particular project is key to the eventual turn around of the Blackstone River’s ability to once again host anadromous, or “sea running” fish. The concept is a fairly simple one. To re-introduce anadromous sport fish like salmon and shad to the Blackstone River, there must be a reliable and healthy food source. That food source is also anadromous meaning that the species spends its life in the open ocean, but needs to return to a fresh water environment to reproduce. They also need clean and healthy environments where they can feed, spawn and have their offspring develop. Blueback herring and alewife are indicator species that support larger anadromous species. The only environments suitable for that in the Blackstone River watershed are those fresh water marshes like those at Valley Falls and Lonsdale.

The other key to the success of the re-introduction of these fish species is their ability to travel to those marshes from the ocean. If you follow the Blackstone River to its mouth just below the Slater Mill in Pawtucket, you will find that the river does not empty directly into Narragansett Bay, but that it joins the



tidal Seekonk River and together they reach the Bay.

According to the draft Blackstone River Strategic Anadromous Fish Restoration Plan, Phase I of the proposed plan focuses on helping the anadromous species reach spawning habitat in the Lonsdale Marsh area via ladders and bypass channels that would allow the fish upstream passage around the four dams on the lower mainstem of the Blackstone River between Main Street in Pawtucket and Ashton. Current estimates for the initial phase of the project are between \$1.9 and \$2.4 million.

“We can still do other projects downstream and whenever we can restore wetlands we have to take the opportunity. Both reducing headwater pollution and the restoration of marshes downstream can happen simultaneously.”

Donna Williams, *Blackstone River Advocate*



This page, above, clockwise. How the Lonsdale Marsh will appear after the restoration. Rendering supplied by the Army Corps of Engineers. Donna Williams, river advocate; tents on the hot pavement at the Lonsdale Drive-in shield partners involved in the Cooperative Agreement as grasses push on through the 20-acre site. Rhode Island Governor, Lincoln Almond. Colonel Brian Osterndorf, Army Corps of Engineers. Senator Lincoln Chafee. Jan Reitsma, Director of Rhode Island’s Department of Environmental Management and Congressman Patrick Kennedy were also in attendance.



One of the many benefits of restoring sea running fish to the Blackstone River is that an “ecological connection” between Narragansett Bay and the Blackstone Watershed will be re-established. That connection is expected to enhance bird life as well as recreational fishing and tourism opportunities throughout the river’s watershed.

**Donna Williams - Advocating for the Blackstone River**

How do you guide a river past 300 years of degradation? How do you push and prod the people in its watershed to do more, think more kindly, and be proactive about a river many of them have written off? One answer is that you follow Donna Williams’ lead. Chair of the Grafton Conservation Commission, Commissioner on the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor and Advocacy Outreach Coordinator at Broad Meadow Brook Conservation Center and Wildlife Sanctuary in Worcester, Donna has long advocated that a healthy Blackstone River is crucial to the health of the Blackstone Valley’s residents.

Donna was one of several New Englanders who recently received an EPA Region I Environmental Merit Award. Her husband, Ted, writes for *Audubon Magazine*. She recently discussed the Blackstone River and her advocacy on its behalf in the context of the 30th anniversary of the federal Clean Water Act that will be celebrated nationwide on October 18th.

When asked if the Blackstone will be fishable and swimmable by 2010, Donna Williams replied: “When I think of what needs to be done, it is too optimistic. I grew up in Worcester and I had no clue about the Blackstone River. It was dirty and of no interest to me. I did know some of Worcester’s waterways, but I had no sense of the river’s connected-ness and of the role the area plays. Then Ted and I moved to Grafton in 1970 and through my husband’s work and my own I came to know the important connections between our land use decisions and our water quality.

“Resources are the key” she added. “Money, public will and values. Heavy hitters and major players are crucial. Through our legacy with the Blackstone we’ve paid a heavy price and I don’t see that we’re going to solve the toxic sediment problem soon. Dredging and sediment containment are very expensive projects. I think we can work on storm water impacts and reduce the pollution of our waterways because the storm water brings everything with it. The key is to slow down the runoff and clean it up before it enters the river.”

While we now have the opportunity to build on thirty years of progress through the Clean Water Act, we are now facing growth impacts throughout the Valley. Yet Donna, as Chair of Grafton’s Conservation Commission, is optimistic. “We are much smarter now and I think that new growth can reduce negative impacts to our watershed in regards to stormwater. In Massachusetts, the Department of Environmental Protection’s stormwater management guidelines require no negative impacts. Local conservation commissions and planning boards have the tools to protect our watershed, they just have to use them.”

Donna’s work at Audubon focuses on the Blackstone River’s headwaters, geographically located north of the Fisherville Dam in South Grafton. At Broad Meadow Brook, Audubon has partnered with the city of Worcester to divert water flow into an enhancement pond in the middle of a phragmites (reed grass) marsh during peak flows. “I monitor the brook as part of the Blackstone Headwaters Monitoring program and I am developing a good sense of our local storm water characteristics. After a storm the color of the water passing through the brook is a murky gray, but the tributary to the left of it continues to run clear. When we test for phosphates and nitrates at Dunkirk Avenue, the results can be really high but they do diminish as the brook flows through the sanctuary. The creation of the enhancement ponds will help improve water quality at the head of the brook.”

The designation of the Blackstone River as an American Heritage River reinforces its distinction as a significant river in this country’s history, but it also indicates that there is a commitment to this river that brings people together around a common goal. According to Donna, “A lot of people are committed to protecting it and they are also working hard to bring other stake holders to the table, too. Our river navigator, Johanna Hunter, is able to network with other agencies and bring us to the table for federal



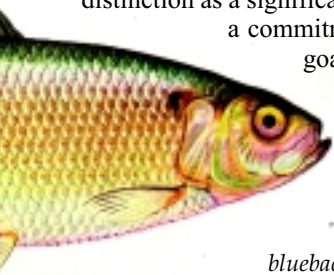
Lonsdale Marsh



Valley Falls in Cumberland, RI



Johanna Hunter, River Navigator, EPA



blueback herring



alewife

next page



Wendy Jencks and Barbara Dixon installed new kiosks at 24 sites in MA and RI-in time for summer tourists. The kiosks provide focus on the area as a destination, while consolidating the literature distribution.

funding of some of our most crucial projects. The renewed **ZAP!** campaign also funded a grant writer last year in order to leverage funds. Our three thousand dollar investment netted over \$500,000 in grants and matches for these projects."

Is the Clean Water Act working? "We continue to work through the Clean Water Act," Donna explained. "Worcester was the first city in New England to qualify for a stormwater management permit from the Environmental Protection Agency. Now we are moving into Phase II where smaller communities down to 10,000 in size, must comply with the regulations. They have until 2003 to really map and understand their storm water drainage system and what that system might carry in the form of pollutants."



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She also advises that a lot of storm water management today is public education. People need to understand that their own actions, in their own backyards, will play a significant role in further reducing pollutants in our water. Wash your car on the lawn, not on your driveway. Clean up after your dog. Never empty anything into storm drains since they empty directly into the nearest waterway.

"We have more work to do," Donna admits. "The Clean Water Act peeled away one layer of pollution - point source - that we now have good control over. But we underestimated the breadth of non-point source pollution throughout our watershed. That will take preventative action on everyone's part."

As a Commissioner on the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, Donna also sees the value of other projects throughout the watershed. "We are looking at the four lower dams on the Blackstone to bring back anadromous fish with ladders and habitat restoration. The water quality has significantly improved and it is a tribute to the Clean Water Act that it is now clean enough at the Valley Falls Marsh to maintain spawning fish populations. We have made great strides with point source pollution via industrial plants and waste water treatment facilities. We do have to keep ratcheting down the discharge limits allowed. In the meantime, we must address flow and storm water run off. In fact, every urban area along the Blackstone River needs to address storm water run off, not just the headwaters."



## AUDACIOUS

**TEAMS** of cyclists, paddlers and runners will start in Worcester, Massachusetts and end in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

**SEPT. 28th, 2002**

2nd annual Blackstone River Valley

## GREENWAY CHALLENGE

Highlighting the long lasting accomplishments of a hard working community of people in The Valley, your participation supports continuing efforts to restore the historic and natural beauty of our area. For more information, call the Heritage Corridor at 401-762-0250 or visit the web site at [www.greenwaychallenge.org](http://www.greenwaychallenge.org)

## RESOURCES

*For more information about the projects described and storm water run-off, contact:*

Narragansett Bay Estuary Program  
RI Department of Environmental Management  
235 Promenade Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor  
Providence, RI 02908  
401-222-2771 x-7237  
[www.state.ri.us/dem](http://www.state.ri.us/dem)

Broad Meadow Brook Conservation  
Center and Wildlife Sanctuary  
414 Massasoit Road  
Worcester, MA 01604  
508-753-6087  
[bmbrook@massaudubon.org](mailto:bmbrook@massaudubon.org)

as well as the National Park Service Rangers at the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor  
One Depot Square  
Woonsocket, RI 02895  
401-762-0440

